RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Re-Envisioning Public Libraries







THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Communications and Society Program

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Re-Envisioning Public Libraries

A report of the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries

by

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This report emanates from the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program. Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments or ideas contained in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement of any individual participant in the Dialogue on Public Libraries or its working group or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries invites you to view the digital version of this report at http://as.pn/libraries. Share your vision for the future of public libraries on Twitter with hashtag *#libraryvision*.

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FOREWORD

The time has come for a new vision of public libraries in the United States. Communities need public libraries—more people are visiting them and using their services, materials and programs than ever before—but communities' needs continue to change.

While the public library was conceived in an age of information scarcity, today's networked world is one of information abundance and mobility. The spread of powerful digital information and communication technologies has touched every aspect of daily life, creating new opportunities. The Internet has become the critical gateway for accessing information, job opportunities, education, financial and government services, healthcare resources and civic participation. Moreover, these technologies present new opportunities for local and regional entrepreneurs and communities to compete, including at national and international levels—economies of small thriving alongside economies of scale.

But this new world of "information plenty" creates new, essential skills, such as the ability to gain value from information and produce new knowledge. Access to digital networks and digital literacy skills are essential for full participation in modern society. Economic, educational, civic and social opportunities are tied to a whole new set of knowledge and skills that barely existed a generation ago, and people without these skills or access to this information abundance are quickly left behind.

Public libraries can be at the center of these changes: a trusted community resource and an essential platform for learning, creativity and innovation in the community. Public libraries have the DNA needed to thrive in this new information-rich, knowledge-based society.

Providing access and connecting knowledge to the needs of individuals and the community have always been at the center of the mission and purpose of libraries.

In fact, public libraries are already at the forefront of tackling social inequalities by providing access to online information and supporting digital literacy. They provide supportive, creative learning spaces for young people after school. As a key strand in the social safety net, public libraries provide an important lifeline to jobs, educational opportunities, literacy, health resources and government and community services, especially for immigrants and disadvantaged populations. Public libraries are highly trusted institutions rooted in the neighborhoods that they serve. Yet some critics question their continuing relevance in an age when information can flow via digital devices to virtually anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Enabling all public libraries to fulfill their new roles will require community leaders, civic partners and librarians to share a new vision for what libraries can be. To meet the needs of individuals, the community and the nation in the knowledge society, public libraries must be re-invented for a networked world, in which the value of networks grows as more connections are made. Innovations built on the old distributed model of the lending library will not suffice. What is needed is a new level of interdependence that communities and libraries must embrace together.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, created the ***Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries*** to help advance the work that public libraries are doing to address community challenges and to support the transformation of communities and their public libraries in the digital age. The Dialogue on Public Libraries is a multi-stakeholder forum that brings together library professionals, policymakers, technology experts, philanthropists, educators and civic leaders to explore, develop and champion new ways of thinking about public libraries.

The Dialogue's work is informed by a select 35-member working group that met twice in the project's first year to examine the evolving societal role of the public library, and to shape and advance a perspective that re-envisions U.S. public libraries for the future. The Working Group's discussions and individual contributions helped shape the perspective on public libraries in the digital age that is presented in this report. We are indebted to them for sharing their vision, knowledge and experience with the Dialogue on Public Libraries.

The Dialogue's vision is also informed by a series of engagements and focus groups with leaders from key public library associations, including the Public Library Association, the Association of Rural and Small Libraries, the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies and the American Library Association. We acknowledge and thank these library leaders for their insights and support of the Dialogue's work.

We hope that this report will support the impactful work that libraries do for their communities and provide a resource for engaging government leaders, trustees and community partners in dialogue to advance concrete actions for transforming public libraries.

The Dialogue and, ultimately, this report explore the essential role of public libraries in a networked world and begin to re-envision the 21st century library in a hyper-connected environment and dramatically changing world. The report is intended to raise the profile of public libraries to the center of the knowledge society, highlight the opportunities and possibilities, increase support for an expanded library role in a networked world and spark a national conversation and action to re-envision the 21st century library as a center of learning, innovation and creativity. While the report's focus is on public libraries, we acknowledge the importance of school and research libraries in the broader conversations around the future of libraries and communities.

We hope that readers will use this report as the basis for exploring how a bold new vision for public libraries, fully realized, can help to make communities stronger, more resilient and the kind of communities where people thrive.

Deborah L. Jacobs, Director
Global Libraries Program
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Charles M. Firestone, Executive Director
Communications and Society Program
The Aspen Institute

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The Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries would not have been possible without the generous support and funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the foundation's Global Libraries Program, led by Deborah Jacobs, director, and Jessica Dorr, deputy director. These two leaders, whose commitment to strengthening public libraries is recognized in the United States and around the world, provided invaluable guidance and insight to the Dialogue throughout its activities to date.

This report is the first from the Dialogue on Public Libraries. Members of the Dialogue's Working Group met twice to examine the evolving roles of public libraries in the United States in light of significant technological, economic and social trends. The first meeting took place at the Aspen Institute's Aspen Meadows conference center in Aspen, Colorado, August 3–6, 2013. Salman Khan, Founder of Khan Academy, and Walter Isaacson, President and CEO of the Aspen Institute, joined the working group to discuss the public library role in the new education ecosystem. The second gathering took place at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., November 5–6, 2013. The engagement and contributions of Working Group participants have helped illuminate ways that communities can leverage investments in libraries to build stronger civic ecologies and forge new partnerships for achieving local and national goals. The Appendix to this report identifies all the Working Group members who shared their valuable insights. We thank them all for their contributions.

Throughout the past year, the Dialogue on Public Libraries also convened roundtable focus group and preview sessions with board members and other thought leaders from the Public Library Association (PLA), Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL), the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), the American Library Association (ALA) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Participants in these gatherings provided illuminating insights into opportunities and challenges inherent in the vision. They also provided invaluable venues to test, develop and refine the themes and future vision for libraries. A list of the participants in these sessions and other informal advisors to the Dialogue appears in the Appendix, and we thank these associations, their leaders and participating members for their support and ongoing engagement.

While it is impossible to record the names of all whose ideas have been captured in this report, a list of our informal advisors appears in the Appendix. I would like to acknowledge in particular Karen Archer Perry, principal consultant for Clarion Collaborative, who collaborated on the initial idea of a library project at the Aspen Institute. Karen played a significant role in the creation of the Dialogue on Public Libraries while serving as senior program officer in the Gates Foundation's Global Libraries Program.

The Dialogue has benefitted from the participation of others in the planning and completion of project activities and this report. These individuals include Allyson Boucher and Maura Zehr of Spitfire Strategies, and Aspen Institute colleagues David Devlin-Foltz, Susanna Dilliplane, Robert Medina and Angbeen Saleem of the Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program (APEP). The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program staff managed all aspects of the project with utmost professionalism. Our C&S Program team includes Ian Smalley, who served as senior project manager for the Dialogue; Tricia Kelly, assistant director; Rachel Pohl, program associate; Ariana Abadian-Heifetz, program associate; and Sarah Eppehimer, senior project manager, and Jackie Orwick, consultant, who have brought the report to life online at our website.

This report is the culmination of a year-long effort and involved many hands. Craig LaMay, associate professor and interim associate journalism dean at Northwestern University's Medill School, served as conference rapporteur for the two working group meetings and wrote an early draft. We are grateful for his work capturing the initial ideas for the vision; Craig's analysis and writing are reflected in this final report.

As the year progressed, the Dialogue received additional writing and editing support from Bob Rothman and Christine Becker, as well as individual working group members. The final report is a synthesis of many contributions. Any omissions and errors contained in this report are the sole responsibility of the report's final author, the director of the Dialogue.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to Maureen Sullivan, past president of the American Library Association, Susan Benton, president of the Urban Libraries Council and Susan Hildreth, director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Each has worn many hats in this project from its inception: participant, consultant, moderator, partner, mentor, advocate and friend. With their deep well of knowledge, keen intuition and vision for what it will take to raise every library to great new heights, Maureen, Susan and Susan have provided invaluable leadership and support, and I thank them.

Amy K. Garmer, Director
Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries

October 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Expanding access to education, learning opportunities and social connections for all is one of the great challenges of our time. It is a challenge made more urgent by the rapid transition from old industrial and service-based economic models to a new economy in which knowledge and creativity are the drivers of productivity and economic growth, and information, technology and learning are central to economic performance and prosperity.

It is not only the economy but all of society that is being reshaped by these trends. Amid these changes, there are divides in wealth, digital inclusion and participation that threaten to widen if we as a nation do not commit to new thinking and aggressive action to provide these opportunities for all.

This is a time of great opportunity for communities, institutions and individuals who are willing to champion new thinking and nurture new relationships. It is a time of particular opportunity for public libraries with their unique stature as trusted community hubs and repositories of knowledge and information.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Libraries are essential to success and progress in the digital age.

The process of re-envisioning public libraries to maximize their impact reflects:

- Principles that have always been at the center of the public library's mission—equity, access, opportunity, openness and participation
- The library's capacity to drive opportunity and success in today's knowledge-based society
- An emerging model of networked libraries that promotes economies of scale and broadens the library's resource reach while preserving its local presence
- The library's fundamental people, place and platform assets

The Dialogue's perspective on the 21st-century library builds on the public library's proven track record in strengthening communities and calls for libraries to be centers of learning, creativity and innovation in the digital age. No longer a nice-to-have amenity, the public library is a key partner in sustaining the educational, economic and civic health of the community during a time of dramatic change. Public libraries inspire learning and empower people of all ages. They promote a better trained and educated workforce. They ensure equitable access and provide important civic space for advancing democracy and the common good. Public libraries are engines of development within their communities.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AT THE CENTER OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Public libraries are poised to play a leading role in helping individuals and communities adapt to this changing world. Many libraries already are linking individuals to information and learning opportunities, driving development and innovation, and serving as community connectors. With nearly 9,000 public library systems and 17,000 library branches and outlets across the country, there is already a significant physical presence and infrastructure to leverage for long-term success.

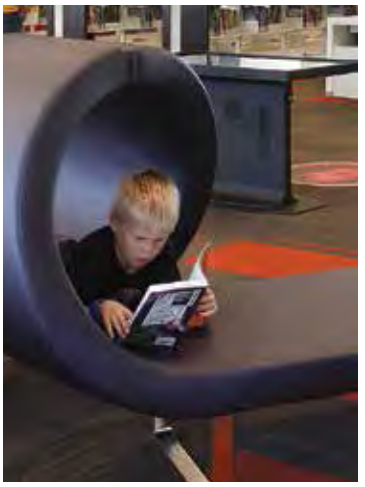
Enabling all libraries to fulfill their new roles will require library leaders, policy makers and community stakeholders to re-envision the public library and take advantage of the opportunities it offers.

PEOPLE, PLACE AND PLATFORM

The emerging value proposition of the public library is built around three key assets—people, place and platform:



- **PEOPLE.** The public library is a hub of civic engagement, fostering new relationships and strengthening the human capital of the community. Librarians are actively engaged in the community. They connect individuals to a vast array of local and national resources and serve as neutral conveners to foster civic health. They facilitate learning and creation for children and adults alike.



- **PLACE.** The public library is a welcoming space for a wide range of purposes—reading, communicating, learning, playing, meeting and getting business done. Its design recognizes that people are not merely consumers of content but creators and citizens as well. Its physical presence provides an anchor for economic development and neighborhood revitalization, and helps to strengthen social bonds and community identity. The library is also a virtual space where individuals can gain access to information, resources and all the rich experiences the library offers. In the creative design of its physical and virtual spaces the public library defines what makes a great public space.



- **PLATFORM.** The public library is user-centered. It provides opportunities for individuals and the community to gain access to a variety of tools and resources with which to discover and create new knowledge. The platform enables the curation and sharing of the community's knowledge and innovation. A great library platform is a "third place" —an interactive entity that can facilitate many people operating individually and in groups—and supports the learning and civic needs of the community.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

The Dialogue concludes that the long-term health of libraries is essential to the long-term health of the communities they serve and identified four strategic opportunities for action to guide the continuing transformation.

1. ALIGNING LIBRARY SERVICES IN SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY GOALS

Public libraries that align their people, place and platform assets and create services that prioritize and support local community goals will find the greatest opportunities for success in the years ahead. Managers of local governments report that it is often difficult to prioritize libraries over other community services such as museums or parks and recreation departments that also serve a distinctly public mission. What libraries need is to be more intentional in the ways that they deploy resources in the community, and more deeply embedded in addressing the critical challenges facing the community. This will require a level of flexibility and adaptability to change as community needs change. It will also require collaboration among libraries, policy makers and community partners to redefine the role of libraries as institutions that inspire learning, drive development, grow social capital and create opportunities.

2. PROVIDING ACCESS TO CONTENT IN ALL FORMATS

As the public library shifts from a repository for materials to a platform for learning and participation, its ability to provide access to vast amounts of content in all formats is vital. Libraries face two immediate major challenges in providing access to content in all forms:

- Being able to procure and share e-books and other digital content on the same basis as physical versions
- Having affordable, universal broadband technologies that deliver and help create content

Dealing with both challenges have been high priorities for public libraries throughout the country. The challenges have been particularly acute for small libraries, those in rural communities and in some urban areas where limited budgets make access to e-books and upgrades to high-speed broadband difficult despite high community need for and interest in both. Ensuring access to e-books, other e-content and more-than-adequate high-speed broadband is a big concern going forward because it impacts the public library's ability to fulfill one of its core missions—to procure and share the leading ideas of the day and enable everyone to participate in the world's conversations.

3. ENSURING THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing public libraries today is to transform their service model to meet the demands of the knowledge society while securing a sustainable funding base for the future. With limited and sometimes volatile funding, however, such transformations will be uneven and incomplete. In addition, the highly local nature of public library funding and governance structures may interfere with both rapid and broad-scale progress—the kind of scale needed to compete and thrive in a world of global networks. Challenges that shape the discussion about long-term public library sustainability given their vital role in the digital era include:

- Identifying reliable sources of revenue for daily operations as well as long-term planning and investment
- Exploring alternative governance structures and business models that maximize efficient and sustainable library operations and customer service
- Becoming more skilled at measuring outcomes rather than counting activities
- Balancing the local and national library value proposition to consider economies of scale in a networked world without compromising local control

4. CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP

Leadership is needed across the community—from elected officials, government leaders, business and civic leaders and libraries themselves—to build communities and public libraries that thrive and succeed together. Vision is a critical component of leadership. Every community needs a vision and a strategic plan for how to work with the public library to directly align the library and its work with the community's educational, economic and other key goals. It must have input from all stakeholder groups in the community. Key steps in building community leadership to support the public library include improving communications with community leaders, developing community champions, strengthening intersections with diverse communities and communities of color, reaching out to and engaging with young-professional organizations and demonstrating the collective impact of partners working together.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Re-Envisioning Public Libraries

A NEW WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE



Expanding access to education, learning opportunities and social connection for all is one of the great challenges of our time. It is a challenge made more urgent by the rapid transition from old industrial and service-based economic models to a new economy in which knowledge and creativity are the drivers of productivity and economic growth, and information, technology and learning are central to economic performance and prosperity. It is not only the economy but all of society that is being reshaped by these trends. Amid these changes, there are troubling divides in wealth, digital inclusion and participation that threaten to widen if we as a nation do not commit to new thinking and aggressive action to provide these opportunities for all.

"We have experienced a huge 'Gutenberg-scale' inflection point in the last 10 years. The world has gone from connected to hyperconnected and from interconnected to interdependent."

—THOMAS FRIEDMAN

The digital era has produced remarkable changes in everyday life—for the individual as well as for the community.

- Social media connect people across town and around the world, enabling new kinds of communities that transcend geographic barriers.
- Mobile technologies provide always-on connectivity to people and information, and they enable us to enjoy more highly personalized and immediate experiences with information, media, education and commerce.
- Advances in sensors and related technology are making individuals healthier and our communities even "smarter" while at the same time creating mountains of data to be filtered, analyzed and turned into new knowledge.
- Informed, engaged citizens demand a stronger voice and greater participation in shaping their communities and increased government transparency and accountability.
- Entire industries are upended by the sometimes disrupting impact of digital technologies; new markets, new businesses, and new relationships arise from the global to the hyperlocal levels, in some cases affording greater choice in where to live and work.

Among the transformative social changes brought on by digitization are new information and learning environments in which knowledge is no longer stable over many years and skills quickly become obsolete.

These environments are shaped by a vast explosion of easily accessible information and new definitions of community, as well as a need for new resources and skills. The changes and their impacts are dramatic:

- **TECHNOLOGY** has made it possible for individuals to have instant access in their homes or on portable devices to the equivalent of the Library of Congress's entire holdings.[1]
- **COMMUNITIES**, once defined almost exclusively by geographic boundaries, are increasingly shaped by social media, often based on mutual interests rather than physical location. Networks, rather than neighborhoods, have become the dominant form of social organization.
- **EMPLOYMENT** is increasingly transient, with the average worker staying in a job 4.4 years rather than an entire career. Among workers born between 1979 and 1999, average tenure is 2.2 years or less.[2] Keeping up with a more mobile job marketplace requires access to information and resources and skills to navigate vast amounts of information.

The knowledge economy requires individuals to acquire a range of skills and to continuously adapt those skills to changing circumstances. Author and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has written about the impact that the evolution to a digitally driven economy, with its demand for continual renewal of skills, is having on individuals and communities. Friedman calls it "a 401(k) world—a world of defined contributions, not defined benefits."[3]

"We have experienced a huge 'Gutenberg-scale' inflection point in the last 10 years. The world has gone from connected to hyperconnected and from interconnected to interdependent. This has been such a shift in degree that it has become a shift in kind," Friedman says in a 2014 interview.[4] Driving this big shift is the emergence and rapid diffusion of four major technologies—personal computing, the Internet, collaborative workflow software and search capabilities (e.g., Google)—which Friedman observes has created "a platform on which more people from more places could compete, connect and collaborate—as individuals or companies—for less money with greater efficiency and greater ease than ever before."[5]

To a significant degree, the knowledge economy gives birth to the creation economy, a free-agent economy in which opportunities for lifelong learning must be abundant and people need skills as knowledge creators, not simply information consumers.

Importantly, these learning opportunities must be present throughout the community and persistent throughout a lifetime.[6] "Now the half-life of a skill is down to about five years, and genres have a lifetime of four or five years, so most learning in the future won't go on in schools," said John Seely Brown, co-director of the Deloitte Center for the Edge, at the first meeting of the Dialogue working group. "We've shifted from stable stocks of knowledge and an archived world to a world of information flows, participation and states of confusion. Now we create as fast as we learn. The game is more complicated."

At the same time that the half-life of a skill is shrinking, information is becoming more abundant and the means of production are becoming more accessible. This opens up new channels for sharing and the distribution of knowledge. A state of information abundance places a premium on the ability to navigate, create and innovate in this new environment. The ability to exploit these means of production and knowledge sharing has become the new "literacy."[7] In this environment, success will belong to the "entrepreneurial learner," the person capable of finding resources anywhere and using them to read the world and teach themselves.[8]

The sweeping changes underway pose new and sustained challenges for communities, which are changing as well. Over the next three decades, the U.S. population is expected to grow to more than 400 million, with most of that growth coming from immigration.

By 2050, one in five Americans will be an immigrant, and 30 percent of the population is projected to be Hispanic. The United States is aging, too: By 2050, one in five Americans will be over the age of 65.[9] Concurrent with these demographic changes are fundamental shifts in the economy that change how Americans will learn and earn a living.

In its 2009 report, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy described the digital era as a moment of technological opportunity "unleashing innovation in the creation and distribution of information" and requiring "new thinking and aggressive action."

The Commission went on to say, "Every advance in communications technology expands the possibilities for American democracy, but every information system also creates potential winners and losers."[10]

How we seize this moment of opportunity, and the visions and actions that carry us forward into the future, will affect not only the health and prosperity of individuals and families, but the quality of the democratic communities that we nourish and sustain in the 21st century. Will they be thriving, prosperous and sustainable communities that attract new residents? Will they be places where we will want to live?

WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES NEED TO FLOURISH IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

LIFELONG ACCESS to an ever-increasing and ever-changing body of knowledge and tools to ensure that their skills remain relevant to the current economy as it continues to evolve

THE CAPACITY AND DISPOSITION TO LEARN IN SMALL, QUICK DOSES rather than wade through mounds of links and piles of data that provide too much information and too little knowledge

THE ABILITY TO USE, UNDERSTAND AND PROCESS INFORMATION IN MANY DIFFERENT FORMS including text, data, audio and video and to evaluate the quality of information from different sources and understand its relevance.

PLACES TO GATHER, collaborate and contribute to knowledge development

ACCESS TO CONVERSATIONS AMONG CREATIVE PEOPLE in their areas of interest so that they can innovate and develop or maintain a competitive advantage in the knowledge economy

People and communities need **PUBLIC LIBRARIES**.

Approaches to managing the opportunities and risks of this new era can differ widely from community to community, but there are approaches that are emerging as indicators of success. One of these is re-envisioning the role of the public library as a vital learning institution and engine for individual, community and civil society development.

The library, the most democratic of public institutions, is the essential civil society space where this new America will make its democratic character. The library is a core civil society institution, democracy's "maker space." In a healthy democracy, civil society is the piece that makes the rest of the democratic machinery possible and workable. Most simply, civil society consists of everything that falls under the rubric of voluntary association, from churches to neighborhood associations, softball leagues to garden clubs.

The library, the most democratic of public institutions, is *the* essential civil society space where this new America will make its democratic character.

Civil society performs a number of critical functions: It provides a buffer between the individual and the power of the state and the market, it creates social capital, and it develops democratic values and habits.[11] Civil society is where citizens *become* citizens. By design and tradition, the public library is *the* essential civil society institution. Through the provision of space, information and inspiration, it enables all the others.

The institution of the public library is uniquely positioned to provide access, skills, context and trusted platforms for adapting in this new society.

A RENEWED VISION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY



America's public libraries have changed with the times with remarkable skill and agility over their long history. The nation's nearly 9,000 public library systems remain highly trusted community anchors where resources are universally available and everyone is welcome. Libraries are stable, reliable, nimble and always there.

> "Libraries can help you get from too much information to knowledge."
>
> —NORMAN JACKNIS

While remaining committed to their essential mission of providing access to knowledge and promoting literacy, 21st-century library roles extend far beyond book lending. For example, when Hurricane Sandy ravaged Queens, New York, in October 2012, the Queens Public Library joined the response effort by providing emergency supplies, comfort and referrals, and served as a steady and visible resource to a community in need. Within three days of the storm, the library opened a mobile site near the hardest hit areas of the borough to provide information, referrals and a safe place for storm-weary residents.[12]

Public libraries have continued to evolve both to respond to immediate challenges and to build their capacity to address long-term individual and community needs, opportunities and challenges. The breadth of their work in the communities they serve today is staggering, including lifelong learning opportunities, workforce development, civic engagement, disaster recovery, public health, environmental sustainability and more. Yet in the face of the new realities of the 401(k) world, even public libraries must define their contributions, not just their benefits.

Public libraries are poised for this transformation. "We lament when institutions dig in their heels and embrace the status quo," says Julia Stasch, then-vice president of U.S. programs for the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, in an interview for a 2012 special edition of National Civic Review on *Public Libraries and Civic Engagement*. "In contrast, libraries on the whole are eager to embrace changes in society."[13]

Libraries' eagerness to embrace changes in society, while retaining the foundations that have made them trusted, welcoming places for everyone, make them ideal partners in the digital age. In fact, libraries, more than any other institution, have the stature and capacity to make the promise of the knowledge society available to all Americans.

A report by International Data Corporation found that in 2010 the quantity of information transmitted globally exceeded one zettabyte for the first time and is doubling every two years.[14] The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) further identified five trends as particularly important developments that communities and their libraries will have to watch and to which they will have to respond:

NEW TECHNOLOGIES will both expand and limit who has access to information.

ONLINE EDUCATION will democratize and disrupt global learning, but going global and mobile does not mean you have to lose tactile and local.

THE BOUNDARIES OF PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION will be redefined.

HYPERCONNECTED SOCIETIES will listen to and empower new voices and groups.

THE GLOBAL INFORMATION ECONOMY will be transformed by new technologies.[15]



These are issues that library leaders, policymakers and the public will need to address as public library models and services evolve in the digital age. The Dialogue's discussions and conclusions raised these same issues and concluded that a willingness to engage in new thinking around issues such as privacy and data protection, and to develop new approaches to preserving these in the digital age, are needed. Libraries will have to contend with these issues if they hope to be at the center of this transformation, helping individuals, communities and leaders navigate the big shift to a digital society.

While libraries have long played an important role in helping individuals navigate changes—such as offering services and resources to support new immigrants in the community—the digital transformation and its effect on all aspects of life is dramatic, comprehensive and permanent. The pace and complexity of change are likely to increase rather than ebb.

As public libraries acquire new roles as platforms for lifelong learning and economic and social development, they likely will need to consider new organizational, governance and business models in response to these pressures and trends.

"The grand theme is that ubiquitous education and learning rises with ubiquitous computing," notes Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Research Center Internet Project. "Persistent education and learning are the reality as people march through their days with their smartphones and, soon, the Internet of Things embedded everywhere. The library as people, place and platform is the new knowledge institution that can serve all those needs."

PEOPLE, PLACE AND PLATFORM

The role of the 21st-century library in the digital era is built on its three key assets: people, place and platform.

THE LIBRARY AS PEOPLE

> Take away my people, but leave my factories, and soon grass will grow on the factory floors. Take away my factories, but leave my people, and soon we will have a new and better factory.
>
> —ANDREW CARNEGIE

The library as people reflects the shift away from building collections to building human capital, relationships and knowledge networks in the community. People are at the center of the library's mission to inspire and cultivate learning, advance knowledge and nurture and strengthen communities. While there are thousands of stories in the public library, the ones that matter most come with the people who use the library.

The public library comes alive when it is teeming with people from all walks of life:[16]

- **PARENTS** reading with their children in colorful, comfortable chairs
- **TEENS** learning how to write code for a new video game in a noisy learning lab
- **STUDENTS** meeting in a library classroom for group discussion as part of an online high school course
- **JOB SEEKERS** working on résumés in career centers, with guidance from a business librarian
- **ENTREPRENEURS** preparing presentations in coworking spaces, using the library-provided Wi-Fi and creating new products in maker spaces
- **IMMIGRANTS** learning English in classes and improving their job-seeking skills with the help of community mentors
- **RETIREES** using new online tools to create digital scrapbooks for their grandchildren
- **AUTHORS** publishing books on new library publishing platforms

In this people-driven environment, skilled librarians help people navigate new technology, manage vast amounts of data and meet their information needs. With the resources and know-how to deliver individualized learning and social experiences, the public library delivers a high-touch participatory experience to support personal goals. Library staffs anticipate individual and community needs and connect people to available resources, both locally and globally.

As the library's roles change and expand, library staff have refined and broadened their skills to meet new needs and define the library's continuing value to the community. They serve many roles, as coaches, mentors, facilitators and teachers more than as sources of information. Measuring outcomes is more important than measuring outputs. An intelligent community, not large circulation numbers, is the primary library goal.

LIBRARY AS PEOPLE:

GROW A READER EARLY LITERACY APP

The Calgary Public Library's Grow a Reader app takes the fun, interactive contents from popular early childhood literacy programs and delivers it to parents via their mobile devices.

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Parents who aren't able to attend programs with their toddlers can use the app to try out literacy skills and behaviors at home. Grow a Reader, which was designed by the library's Virtual Services and Children, Teens and Families departments with involvement of a video production company and an app developer, features 35 videos starring 10 library children services staff. The app can be updated easily by library staff so that vendors aren't needed on an ongoing basis. Calgary has a rapidly growing population and an ongoing "baby boom." In less than two months, the Grow a Reader app was downloaded 1,200 times. It has also made some library staff popular stars among young readers. One toddler seemed mesmerized by his teacher during a parent-child Mother Goose session because, his mother said, he enjoys watching the videos on mom's phone and recognized one of the library stars!

Andrew Sliwinski, co-founder and chief maker at DIY.org, addresses the need for new competencies and skills within libraries:

"Continuously extending the definition of the librarian is neither sustainable nor really in the long-term interest of the institution. Rather, specialization is needed with a focus on maximizing the ability for the human capital within the library, which is one of its largest resources, to engage with patrons. It is through this engagement that the values and the assets within each library can be most fully realized and leveraged by society."

Domain expertise is one of the new scarcities in a world otherwise overflowing with information. How does a library achieve such specialization without just hiring new librarians? How does a library get more librarians engaging with more people? In part, by leveraging its infrastructure to allow for this domain expertise to be shared outward, widely, from urban to rural and to draw from the expertise in the community.

Beth Jefferson, president and CEO of Bibliocommons, says a common descriptor given to librarians in the new information marketplace is "guides." But there is simply too much information for that to be a realistic goal, she says, and while collecting and mining data might be useful, "you need tons of data and the smarts to make sense of it."

> "We are no longer gatekeepers; we are navigators."
>
> —SUSAN HILDRETH

The better response, she says, is to talk of librarians as "curators" for their communities, and communities themselves as curators. The skill set libraries need is domain expertise, and for that libraries need to draw on the people in their communities to help design what Jefferson calls "collaborative filters" designed with the public interest in mind. Commercial search engines are great, but "their algorithms are designed with a for-profit point of view. Libraries are in a different business. Curation in the public interest is distinctly missing."

Building strong relationships with those who are providing content is an important goal of the people-focused public library. This includes not only publishers but also journalists, filmmakers, artists and information workers. Publishers and libraries have had a healthy relationship for a long time despite more recent controversies over e-book access and pricing. Digital technologies have disrupted the traditional publishing/library supply chain. Consequently, libraries need to be sensitive to and engaged with the ecosystem that produces the content that gets into libraries, whether user-generated or professionally created content. This includes a recognition that an increasing amount of content produced is in new forms, especially large amounts of visual content, including video, photographs, maps and other forms of digitized and visualized data.

THE LIBRARY AS PLACE

The library is first and foremost a place...a place that promotes development in society. It is the family room of a community. That's the vision, that's the future.

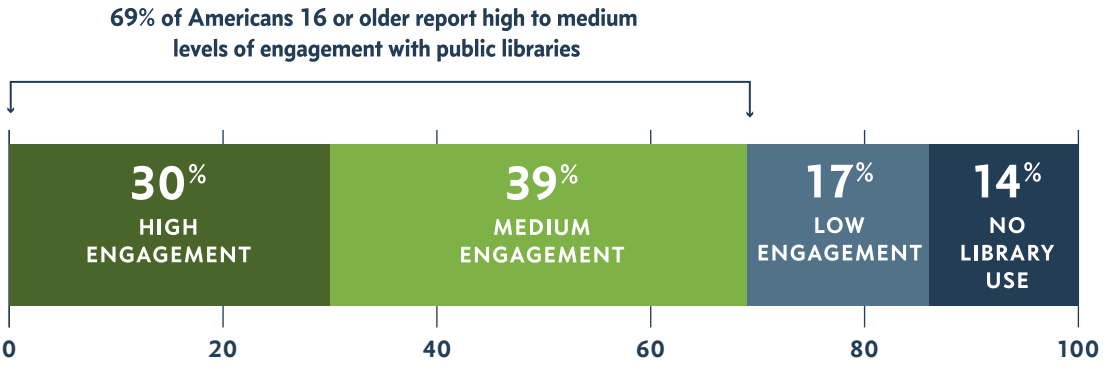
—AKHTAR BADSHAH

Today's library is both a physical and virtual place, but it continues to be the physical presence of the library that anchors it most firmly in the community. Research and experience show that geography and place still matter.[17] The Pew Research Center's survey on library usage found that a large proportion of Americans, even those who seldom visit a library, consider libraries important institutions in their geographic communities and believe that their communities would suffer a loss if the library closed.[18]

In an increasingly virtual world, physical library places are community assets. They:

- **ESTABLISH PERSONAL CONNECTIONS** that help define community needs and interests
- **PROVIDE AN ANCHOR** for economic development and neighborhood revitalization
- **STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY IDENTITY** in ways that yield significant return on investment, including drawing people together for diverse purposes
- **PROVIDE A SAFE AND TRUSTED LOCATION** for community services such as health clinics, emergency response centers, small business incubators, workforce development centers and immigrant resource centers
- **CREATE CONNECTING PLACES** in new locations that draw people together—shopping malls, big box stores, airports and mobile buses

PUBLIC LIBRARY USERS AND PROPONENTS ARE NOT A NICHE GROUP[19]



"Libraries have always been an economic driver of communities," says Robert Harrison, city administrator of Issaquah, Washington. "Libraries are like Starbucks without the coffee: an important place to build social connections. Anyone can use it."

The physical library will become less about citizens checking out books and more about citizens engaging in the business of making their personal and civic identities. As more information moves to digital formats, public libraries will hold less material locally in their physical collections. Library users will be able to access information digitally wherever it resides through library networks. While traditional computer work stations remain important and in demand, personal or shared mobile devices that provide easy connections to library Wi-Fi and high-speed broadband networks are becoming a dominant form of connection. The reduction in physical materials, greater customer mobility and the desire for more collaboration and creation are changing the nature of the public library's physical space.[20]

The physical library must undergo a transition that embraces the openness and flexibility needed to thrive in a world of constant change. Central to this flexibility is creating spaces that can adapt to the changing operational models of libraries.

The library's virtual presence must be as engaging as it's phyical space and fully serve the library's mission built around equitable access, learning and civic development.

In an article for *Library Journal,* architect Peter Gisolfi contrasts "the ways we were" in the 20th century model—quiet, large areas of stacks and extensive collections of printed material, an imposing circulation desk, modest community room—with emerging trends that recognize varied and new uses. These trends range from greater transparency among spaces, larger spaces for children and teens, meeting and activity rooms of different sizes to accommodate public events and performances or coworking and collaboration and technology-centric spaces.

Gisolfi advises, "Whether you build a new library or transform an existing one, do not build the best library of the previous century. Create an environment that facilitates new patterns of interacting, learning and accessing information and is sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes that inevitably will come."[21]

The public library remains a destination for many users, serving many purposes—personal quiet time for reading, research or homework; supervised afterschool activities until parents get home from work; public events and performances; innovation labs, hacker and maker spaces; and coworking and collaboration spaces.

Many libraries are creating spaces that are rich with tools and technologies that inspire and facilitate learning, discovery and creation and where experimentation is encouraged with trained library staff and community mentors. People and technology meet at the library. But as a learning place, the library becomes more than a destination, a term that suggests an end or arrival point. Instead, the library becomes a way station on the learning journey, a place that one passes through on the way to some other destination. This shift in role will impact the physical space of the library, the ways in which people interact with it and the types of services provided there.

In addition to being a physical space, the library in the digital age is a virtual space accessible from anywhere 24/7.

Websites, online discussion groups, classes, book clubs and library-hosted Wi-Fi hotspots are examples of the growing community presence of the always-open virtual library.

The library as it exists within virtual space must be considered as a wholly independent but highly integrated experience; that is, the library's virtual presence must be as engaging as its physical space and fully serve the library's mission built around equitable access, learning and civic development. Platforms must be conceived that address not only the operational and practical benefits of libraries but also benefits that are emotional and highly social.

LIBRARY AS PLACE:

NEW CONNECTIONS AND NEW PLACES

A theater in a library and a library in an airport are two examples of today's library as place.

The Ron Robinson Theater, part of the Central Arkansas Library System's main library campus, is a 315-seat multi-use venue with state of the art technology. At the theater, the library provides a range of programs, including films, music performances, plays, readings, lectures, speakers and children's activities. The library sought and won a bond issue to fund the construction of the building in a public-private partnership. In addition to the library's theater, the building includes retail stores, offices and a restaurant.

The theater is also used by other groups such as the Little Rock Film Festival and the Clinton School of Public Service. It enriches and strengthens the cultural, economic and educational life of the community.

The Free Library in Philadelphia partnered with the Airport Authority to open a virtual library at the Philadelphia International Airport. While relaxing in comfortable lounge chairs in a virtual reading room, customers can log on to the airport's free Wi-Fi to access the Free Library's e-books, nearly 1,200 author podcasts, and other digital content.



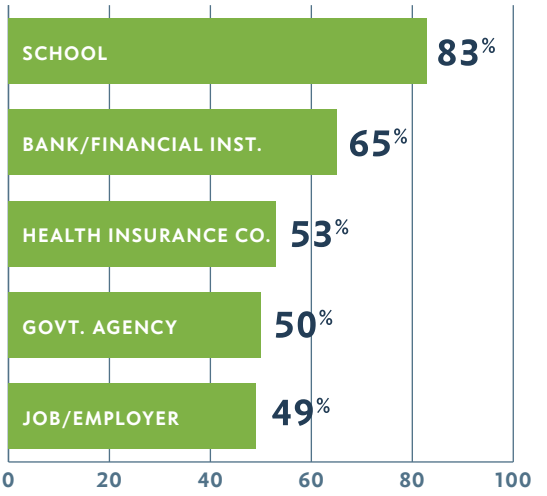
62%
of public libraries report they are the **ONLY SOURCE OF FREE INTERNET** in the community[23]

This requires thinking beyond the transaction that characterizes many online library experiences today. The public library should define what makes a great online public space. Yet there are hurdles to developing the online library experience beyond simple transactions and information retrieval, including the expertise to do so, insufficient financial and technical resources and the lack of adequate broadband capacity and digital literacy skills in many areas.

Library Wi-Fi in disadvantaged neighborhoods may address an issue that is echoed in the Pew Research Center's library user topology survey, *From Distant Admirers to Library Lovers–and Beyond*, which found higher rates of library use among the wealthier and better-educated members of the community and comparatively lower rates of library use in poorer and less-educated communities.[22] Easily accessible Wi-Fi may provide the spark needed to encourage residents to come into the physical library and explore the programs, workshops and services it has to offer.

In a new twist on providing Wi-Fi, the New York Public Library and Chicago Public Library have launched programs that provide take-home Internet access (Wi-Fi "hotspots") and digital training for residents in neighborhoods where digital access is low.

EXPECTATIONS: When surveyed, people state that other institutions expect them to have online access at home.[24]



"From day one, we have worked to increase Internet connectivity and knowledge for our residents because today's digital skills are 21st-century workforce skills," said Mayor Rahm Emanuel at the time Chicago's "Internet to Go" program was announced.[25]

In keeping with the public library's focus on people, Chicago Public Library Commissioner Brian Bannon said during a panel discussion on the future of libraries at the 2014 Aspen Ideas Festival that the program "is less about the technology, more about the support of the individual, the family and the community."[26]

A great library platform is a "third place"—an interactive entity that can facilitate people operating individually or in groups.

THE LIBRARY AS PLATFORM

Every book, every idea, every image, every archive, every piece of information should not only be available for free online anytime, anywhere, but also needs to be curated and linked so that anyone in the world can engage in the creative activity that we all rely on to build a better world.

—ANTHONY MARX

The transformations of the digital age enable individuals and communities to create their own learning and knowledge. To that end, libraries become platforms—bases on which individuals and communities create services, data and tools that benefit the community.[27] They allow for innovation that the platform creators cannot anticipate. Users may "customize" the platform and adapt its resources to their individual needs, whatever those needs may be. The library as community learning platform is the innovative proposition of the public library in the digital age.

According to David Weinberger of Harvard University, the library platform can be thought of "as an infrastructure that is as ubiquitous and persistent as the streets and sidewalks of a town, or the classrooms and yards of a university. Think of the library as coextensive with the geographic area that it serves, like a canopy, or as we say these days, like a cloud."[28]

A great library platform is a "third place"—an interactive entity that can facilitate many people operating individually or in groups. The library platform supports the learning needs and goals of the community. To accomplish this, libraries embody the disposition of the entrepreneurial learner: seizing opportunities wherever they may exist, engaging others in the process. The library can then curate and archive the solutions created for sharing and future use. As a platform, the library promotes development in the community and society by identifying and filling gaps in community services including early-childhood education, lifelong learning, technology literacy and e-government.[29] The library as platform makes the library a participatory enterprise.

One distinguishing feature of the library as platform is that it is trusted to be objective and operate in the interests of its users. This is in contrast to commercial platforms that blur the line between user and commercial interests. In addition, the library is uncompromisingly free of charge. It differentiates itself from other "free" services by selling no ads and honoring the privacy of its users. Users may "opt in" to features that involve data sharing with third parties, possibly receiving extra benefits when they enter that bargain.

At the same time, as a platform, the library exploits its assets—content, human capital and expertise. It draws on those assets for community engagement and allows people to contribute their knowledge and experiences to those assets. The library as platform creates community dialogue that makes way for new expertise and creates social knowledge.

The library as platform sees itself as LaaS– "library as a service." Within the building itself, it starts with the biggest, fattest, most secure pipe that is possible, abundant Wi-Fi, devices for borrowing and a default embrace of new interface and display gadgets. Outside the physical library, it delivers these high-quality experiences on-demand to users wherever they may be and through whatever device they may use and for whatever purpose. Content may come from within the library's own collections, from a national content platform or anywhere in the cloud.

The library as platform radically reshapes the library's daily activities, shifting away from the old model of organizing and "lending" the world's knowledge toward a new vision of the library as a central hub for learning and community connections. It shapes the fire hose of information from the community as content is digitized and as social media and other comment-surfacing technologies bring forth data and insight about users and the community. The library's new activities include:

- Bringing analytical understanding to disorganized and abundant streams of information
- Connecting people seeking information to the resources, people or organizations that can provide it
- Synthesizing, analyzing, storing and curating information for those who want to consult material in the future
- Facilitating discovery and serendipitous encounters with information
- Helping people solve local problems
- Recruiting volunteers and specialists to participate in platform activities, especially by helping meet the needs of those querying the system
- Performing information concierge services and access to government services that are not at times delivered well by existing government agencies

LIBRARY AS PLATFORM:

LIBRARIES AS 21ST-CENTURY CURATORS

Libraries have long been known as curators of the community's culture and knowledge. This role involves organizing information, providing context, and connecting content in ways that add value for users and the community. As available content grows exponentially, the library's curator capacity becomes more important and more challenging.

Some libraries are leading public curation projects using crowdsourcing techniques to engage online communities. The library can curate or, in the case of these examples, provide the platform for curation to happen.

The **New York Public Library's Building Inspector project** is creating digitized images of maps that show building footprints in the city at particular points in time and making the maps widely available online. NYPL Labs is training computers to recognize building shapes and other data so that it can be compared over time and engaging city residents—operating as "citizen cartographers"—to check the accuracy of the computers' work. The process helps city residents see and tell the city's own story over time.

HTTP://BUILDINGINSPECTOR.NYPL.ORG/

Based at the DC Public Library in Washington, DC, the **MapStory project** is helping citizens to tell the stories of their neighborhoods and to see how they are evolving over time. With a grant from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the MapStory Foundation team is designing a nonprofit global data commons built on open source code for anyone to use. There are map stories on the spread of bike lanes in U.S. cities and the spread of Walmart stores across the country. With funding from IMLS, the project is helping DC Public Library to digitize and geo-reference its extensive map collection.

HTTP://MAPSTORY.ORG/

Today, most public libraries see their catalog as the platform. That will have to change as they collect data and deploy existing resources in new ways, develop new relationships and partnerships in the community, and restructure their spaces. To be successful, the library platform will require:

- **A DIFFERENT KIND OF ACCESS INFRASTRUCTURE**, including a more robust identification system that protects individual privacy
- **A NEW DISTRIBUTION INFRASTRUCTURE** than currently used by most libraries in order to get physical and digital material to users
- **MORE SOPHISTICATED ANALYTICS** that will enable the library itself to become a "learning organization"
- **INTEROPERABILITY** to enable scaling of the platform and facilitate innovation and competition

Part of the challenge ahead lies in the traditionally decentralized model of U.S. public libraries. In that model, every community library goes it alone. That will not work for the library as platform, which for reasons of cost and quality needs to be created on a larger scale.

Ideally, a digital public library model would have a single interface—or at most a few—that allows existing online library catalogs to be fully integrated with new ones. It will provide a single point of access to all titles, taking the burden of both technology and archiving off individual libraries. And in an information marketplace that includes behemoths like Amazon and Google, libraries need a platform robust enough to win what Reed Hundt, principal of REH Advisors and former chairman of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), calls "the competition of platforms." "Right now Amazon offers a better online experience than a bookstore, and Netflix is better at streaming video, and that's the competition for libraries," says Hundt.

Unification—getting libraries to work together, to integrate their intellectual and capital resources—is a critical platform issue. Libraries have traditionally defined and designed the user experience. Platforms empower others to exercise their capabilities in creating services, data and tools. The library has to operate at scale and facilitate activities among users that the library alone cannot handle.

SCALING UP: **ENVISIONING A NATIONAL DIGITAL PLATFORM**

The public library in the digital age is a key networked knowledge institution. However, networks do not stop at town or city limits, or the county or state line. Moreover, the connections they provide and foster support individuals and the entire community in pursuit of educational, economic and other opportunities, whether those opportunities are present locally, regionally, nationally or globally.

A networked society envisions public libraries connecting with other curated knowledge resources via a scalable digital network, with access to open platforms that enable discovery, creation and sharing. It is important to think not only of how to foster connections at the local level but also how to scale-up in ways that open the public library to innovation, eliminate barriers traditionally imposed by geography and address the long-term issues of sustainability.

To do this, its local platform must be connected across a shared platform in which libraries can coalesce to work—a network of libraries and other knowledge institutions. Unlike national library models such as in the United Kingdom and Australia, this digital platform would be a network of federated public libraries and other knowledge-creating institutions, with central hubs for the purpose of connecting but local autonomy and control over the platform itself.

There are models of cooperation among libraries, including OCLC, the merging of independent libraries into larger regional systems, the work of the Metropolitan New York Library Council and state education and research networks that suggest how a library platform with regional or national scope may emerge.

The Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) provides one model for envisioning a national platform that brings together the riches of the country's libraries, archives and museums and makes them freely available to the world. The DPLA is a new kind of institution—a network of state and regional libraries, archives and other knowledge institutions that makes their collections more broadly accessible and provides them with support to serve their communities more effectively.

The DPLA operates in three ways:

- **AS A PORTAL** that enables users to search through the libraries' vast collections in a variety of ways, depending on their needs
- **AS A PLATFORM** that enables users to create new tools and apps from the collections
- **AS AN ADVOCATE FOR A STRONG PUBLIC OPTION** to ensure that materials remain accessible and open[30]

Housed at the Boston Public Library, DPLA operates with a series of local hubs that provide materials and services for its national network.

- **Content Hubs** provide materials to the DPLA and commit to maintaining their digital records: ARTstor, Biodiversity Heritage Library, California Digital Library, David Rumsey Map Collection, J. Paul Getty Trust, U.S. Government Printing Office, Harvard Library, HathiTrust Digital Library, Internet Archive, National Archive and Records Administration, New York Public Library, Smithsonian Institution, University of Florida, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Southern California Libraries, University of Virginia.
- **Service Hubs** offer services such as professional development, digitization, and metadata creation and enhancement: Connecticut Digital Archives, Digital Commonwealth (MA), Digital Library of Georgia, Empire State Digital Network (NY), Indiana Memory, Kentucky Digital Library, Minnesota Digital Library, Montana Memory Project (via Mountain West Digital Library), Mountain West Digital Library, North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, the Portal to Texas History, South Carolina Digital Library.

Through the Federal Communications Commission's E-rate reform proceeding, DPLA has proposed the creation of DPLA Local, which would provide digital services to local libraries to enable them to make their collections of community resources more accessible and usable. Funding is needed to initiate a pilot for DPLA Local.

Action is already underway to move the idea of a national digital platform forward. In April 2014, the Institute of Museum and Library Services held a public hearing in New York among library and archive leaders to explore various aspects of a national platform (infrastructure, content, use, the creation of tools, access at scale and skills) and its role in furthering national digital initiatives. Following the hearing, Maura Marx, deputy director of IMLS, commented on the momentum behind the idea of a national digital platform: "I heard several people express in different ways a central idea: that funders and practitioners should

recognize that we stand atop about 20 years of experimentation and innovation in digital library initiatives, and that it's about time we decide which results are the most viable and promising and work in a focused way on improving and connecting those pieces."

A national digital library platform could be:

- **AN INNOVATION PLATFORM** to facilitate the sharing of innovations that take place at the edges of the library field and bring them into the center
- **A WAY FOR LIBRARIANS TO SHARE** information and content to enhance their resources to meet similar needs
- **AN E-BOOK PLATFORM** to facilitate access to digital content or a book recommendation engine

"With a nationally networked platform, library and other leaders will also have more capacity to think about the work they can do at the national level that so many libraries have been so effective doing at the state and local levels," says Maureen Sullivan, past president of the American Library Association. Some may see risks in being too bold, but the reality at a time of churn and innovation is that there are equal risks in not being bold enough.

There is a financial benefit to scale as well because it increases negotiating power. A common digital platform would help, giving libraries the ability to negotiate with content creators, such as negotiating with publishers for a single price for e-book lending.

"With a nationally networked platform, library and other leaders will also have more capacity to think about the work they can do at the national level that so many libraries have been so effective doing at the state and local levels."

—MAUREEN SULLIVAN

Connecticut Governor Dannel P. Malloy took action to support such negotiating power in June 2014 when he signed legislation to create a statewide library e-book platform, run by the Connecticut State Library, to negotiate better prices in e-content purchasing and to make e-content broadly accessible at any public library across the state.[31] Other states have pilot projects to explore statewide platforms for e-books and other applications as well.

Operating at scale also requires effective use of data. Public libraries are just beginning to shift their understanding of how to collect, analyze and use data more effectively to make them a much smarter and more efficient service. However, operating at scale in such a way is not part of the tradition of American libraries. "The idea of truly federating libraries is unbelievably powerful and unbelievably difficult," says Linda Johnson, president and CEO of the Brooklyn Public Library.



CREATING GOOD COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

If the library as people, place and platform is the new knowledge institution that can serve the need for persistent opportunities for learning and social connection, what does it look like for the public library to fulfill this role? And in what ways does the community benefit?

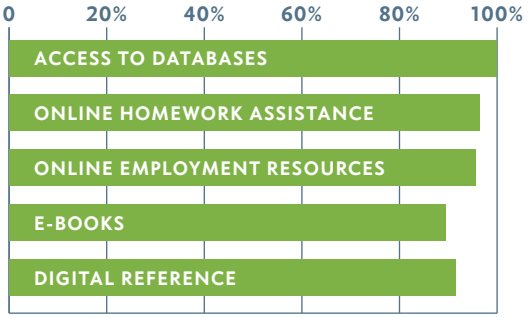
The answers lay in understanding how the public library draws on its deep credentials as educators and civic connectors to reposition the library as a key hub for learning, innovation and creativity in this environment. Today, we see how the public library can be especially effective in the areas of informal and nontraditional learning, jobs and workforce development, addressing new literacies, fostering civic participation and closing broadband and participation divides. And innovators in communities of all sizes are inventing the new ways in which libraries will benefit the community for years to come.

COORDINATED, INFORMAL AND NONTRADITIONAL LEARNING

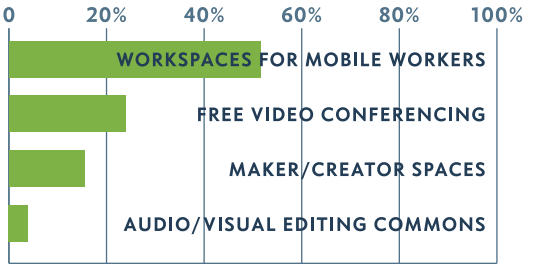
Public libraries provide a lifetime of learning opportunities for people in the communities they serve. They are especially effective at supporting informal learning, connecting diverse learning experiences, filling gaps between learning opportunities and offering new learning models that may not be feasible in schools, which face tighter boundaries and controls.

IMPACT OF LIBRARIES ON COMMUNITY[32]

Nationally, public libraries provide these community access services:



Public libraries are also increasingly providing these platform services that enable users to generate their own content and collaborate:



Drawing on the Dialogue's people, place and platform model, the process of re-envisioning public libraries calls for a stronger role in learning by being more intentional and strategic to produce better results. Actions to support this goal include:

- **Building partnerships** with local schools to support coordinated learning and reduce out-of-school learning loss
- **Expanding library roles in early childhood and prekindergarten** learning for children from low-income families to close achievement gaps, reduce dropout rates and help all children compete in the 21st-century economy
- **Stepping up to "own" afterschool and summertime learning programs** with well-designed curricula—such as engaging, participatory learning experiences created in partnership with schools, museums, recreation departments, and other community learning resources—that support and connect to school learning goals
- **Giving virtual learning experiences a physical presence** in the community by offering events, meet-ups and multigenerational learning spaces and providing information/access to the best apps to support virtual learning
- **Engaging youth** in dynamic learning labs that support interest-driven learning through use of digital media, mentors and networks of opportunity
- **Creating alternative pathways to learning**, credentialing and certification, and offering digital credentials, called badges, that recognize and acknowledge learning outside schools and formal educational institutions

HOWARD COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM:

HITECH: THE ROAD TO A STEM CAREER



The Howard County Library System's HiTech digital media lab is designed to open doors and opportunities to the region's teens.

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The Howard County Library System's HiTech digital media lab is designed to open doors and opportunities to the region's teens. HiTech delivers cutting-edge science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education using hands-on technology projects, experiential learning and peer-to-peer communications. Envisioned as a launching point for the STEM career pipeline, HiTech focuses on producing the next generation of scientists, mathematicians and engineers to meet the needs of the region's highly-skilled job market. The curriculum includes both self-paced and structured learning opportunities divided into four modules that emphasize interaction, improvisation, invention and instruction. The HiTech Academy component focuses on teens who are interested in pursuing higher education in science, technology, engineering or math by providing instruction, site visits to STEM work environments and attendance at college-sponsored STEM sites.

Since HiTech's launch, more than 2,000 teens have participated in a wide range of classes, created a mobile game that was released in 2013 and has been downloaded 5,000 times around the world, and worked on the library's Choose Civility e-book featuring their own stories and photos.

JOBS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A library that is attuned to the challenges facing the community also has a deep understanding of its economic structures and challenges and the businesses that provide the jobs that sustain the economic health of the community. Libraries can help to accelerate workforce development and learning opportunities by providing a connection between industry and education. With its education and learning credentials and its connections, the public library is in a good position to connect community residents to the training and career development resources that local employers need. They can do this by partnering with local businesses, chambers of commerce and community colleges to provide access to curricula and resources, to technology and certification programs and to job search resources to maintain a highly skilled yet highly flexible workforce.

Of particular importance in the digital era is the library's ability to connect job seekers to the technology resources needed to find and compete for job opportunities, especially when 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies only accept online applications.[33]

While libraries increasingly are seen as part of the education infrastructure that serves children and schools, their role in the workforce infrastructure is newer and less well understood.

This is a time of enormous opportunity for public libraries to reach out to local and state governments, labor departments, economic development agencies and others to ask how the library can use its platform to create a 21st-century workforce that will keep current businesses in place and attract new ones to the community.

THE LIBRARY AS LITERACY CHAMPION

The 21st-century library is the champion of the literacies needed to navigate information abundance, create knowledge, bolster economic opportunity and make democracy dynamic. In the digital age, content is widely available in diverse formats outside traditional publications, requiring new skills to succeed in this information-rich environment. Building on its historic commitment to literacy, the library is uniquely positioned to provide access, skills, context and trusted platforms for sharing. Examples of new literacies include the ability to:

- **INTERACT WITH TECHNOLOGY DEVICES AND CONTENT** at very different levels than ever before
- **FILTER MASSIVE AMOUNTS OF INFORMATION** and translate it into knowledge in a highly complex environment
- **SELECT THE RIGHT TOOLS** for knowledge creation and management

The public library can partner with the community to define the difference between highly literate and less literate—across a vast range of literacies, including civic, financial and health literacy—and then help close the gap.

Most importantly, the public library can work with community partners to provide personalized and flexible digital learning experiences that individuals need to become comfortable and adept at participating in digital society. [34]

JOBS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

LIBRARIES SUPPORTING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

In **Omaha, Nebraska**, the Omaha Public Library has initiated new partnerships with the business community that build on the library's community engagement and learning work. The library is working with regional software companies and technology businesses looking for workers with software and design skills to establish workforce development initiatives that train area residents in these much-needed skills. The participating businesses are helping the library rethink its technology offerings to support workforce needs.

In **Memphis, Tennessee**, the Memphis Public Library's JobLINC mobile career center helps job hunters find employment opportunities and helps employers find new employees. The 38-foot bus delivers job and career resources to job seekers at convenient locations out in the community. It comes equipped with computers, email access, information resources and staff to assist with job listings, job applications, resume writing, interviewing and improving other skills.

In **New York City,** the Department of Small Business Services established one of its Workforce 1 career centers at the Brooklyn Central Library. The center prepares and connects city residents to job opportunities in the city, with emphasis on both job skills needed by local employers and soft skills such as interviewing that are equally important to getting a job.

THE LIBRARY AS CIVIC RESOURCE

The public library is a place for the community to experiment and collaborate, to gather and engage, and to explore and confront important community issues such as homelessness, immigration, economic development, public health and environmental sustainability. With its deep knowledge and relationships in the community, its physical presence and its platform, the public library is playing an important role in sustaining the civic health of the community. Libraries are carrying out this important civic role in the 21st century by:

- **SUPPORTING GOVERNMENT SERVICE DELIVERY** including public health education, immigration and citizenship services, government jobs information, disaster response and recovery information
- **ENGAGING CITIZENS IN THE GOVERNING PROCESS**, both through face-to-face participation and use of the library platform to strengthen citizen-citizen and citizen-government partnerships
- **CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES** to bring people of different backgrounds together to solve problems and build stronger communities

Civic engagement in the digital age takes on new dimensions with exciting opportunities for virtual engagement.

ADDRESSING THE BROADBAND AND PARTICIPATION DIVIDES

At the first Dialogue working group meeting, Susana Vasquez, executive director of LISC in Chicago, displayed a map of broadband use in Chicago in which those neighborhoods with the least connectivity matched almost exactly with a map of neighborhoods with the highest unemployment, crime and violence; the most school closings; and poorest health services. For many kids in these neighborhoods, Vasquez said, the library is the only public institution that works, that is accessible, safe and welcoming. Others, like schools or the police, kids engage "not by choice." "Libraries are not like that," she said. "It's a voluntary engagement. It's a trusted institution."

Public libraries are a critical institutional bulwark against the well-documented problem of growing income and educational inequality in the United States. One reason library use has risen in the last decade is that many Americans do not have home Internet access and face numerous obstacles to getting it. A 2013 Pew Research Center survey reported that only 70 percent of Americans have broadband access at home—in short, that the so-called "digital divide" remains persistent.[35] Among U.S. households with annual income below $30,000, 46 percent have no high-speed home Internet access.[36] The poor, in other words, cannot participate fully in the new learning and civic ecologies created by networked communications.

LIBRARIES AS A CIVIC RESOURCE:

HEALTHY L.I.F.E.

Healthy L.I.F.E. is the Houston Public Library's (HPL) health-based literacy initiative designed to empower and equip families with information, resources and tools needed for healthy living.

With 66 percent of adults and 34 percent of youth in the Houston area overweight or obese and one in five Harris County adults lacking basic literacy skills, the library leveraged its status as a trusted learning resource to tackle a significant community health education challenge through a family-learning model. Healthy L.I.F.E. offers regularly-scheduled events to help parents and children learn together about healthy lifestyles, stress-free living, school success and healthy eating while also getting access to free community resources that support better health. The events are held at branches that serve low-income populations, have positive relationships with schools and community groups, and experience high-demand for and interest in family-centered programming.

Since its creation, more than 50 agencies have worked with the library to contribute information, resources, and services to more than 3,100 families including 50,000 pounds of fresh food distributed to needy families by the Houston Food Bank, along with 3,000 nutrition and fitness books and DVDs. Among participating families surveyed, 80 percent have committed to changing their lifestyles and improving their own healthy-living behaviors.

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"We can't just be providing space... we are a learning institution, not just an access institution."

—JOHN SZABO

A 2010 study by the University of Washington, the first to look at computer use in libraries, found that the public library provides to millions of Americans the only computer and Internet access they have.[37] Among the things they do with that access is apply for jobs; apply for admission to schools, colleges and training programs; renew car registrations; research health issues; find tax and other government forms; take online courses; do homework; and communicate with family, friends and employers.

"Competition is not providing enough for all communities," says Carolyn Anthony, director of the Skokie Public Library. "In Skokie, 50% of people using internet in libraries don't have connection at home."

As Internet-based education increases, the poor have no way to acquire the digital literacy skills that are the foundation of knowledge creation and social participation in an information-based economy—not without public libraries.[38]

"Libraries need to stand in when other institutions have failed. So many communities are poorly wired. Private companies wire cities, but smaller communities are often overlooked," says Rod Gould, city manager of Santa Monica, California. "Connectivity is essential."

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS



Connecting people to the world in a different way is the challenge of the 21st century for public libraries in communities of all sizes. Libraries long ago established their place in the hearts of their communities. Sustaining and broadening that position requires new thinking about what a library is and how it drives opportunity and success in today's world.

The Dialogue has identified four strategic opportunities for action to guide this continuing transformation:

- **ALIGNING LIBRARY SERVICES IN SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY GOALS**
- **PROVIDING ACCESS TO CONTENT IN ALL FORMATS**
- **ENSURING THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES**
- **CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP**

Dealing with these challenges requires collaboration among library leaders, policy makers at all levels of government—particularly those closest to the library and people it serves—and public and private community partners and stakeholders. The range of partners and stakeholders can and should be broad, to include private sector businesses, local entrepreneurs, authors and publishers, technology experts, nonprofit organizations with shared priorities, journalists, educators, community foundations, library trustees, the public and more. The wider the reach in building partnerships, the greater the impact for libraries and the communities they serve.

ALIGNING LIBRARY SERVICES IN SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY GOALS

Public libraries that align their people, place and platform assets and create services that prioritize and support local community goals will find the greatest opportunities for success in the years ahead. Managers of local governments report that it is often difficult to prioritize libraries over other community services because libraries are not perceived to be unique in their public purpose when compared to other departments, such as museums or parks and recreation, that also serve a distinctly public mission. What libraries need is to be more intentional in the ways that they deploy resources in the community, and more deeply embedded in addressing the critical challenges facing the community. This will require a level of flexibility and adaptability to change as community needs change.

How should libraries go about this work of aligning with community needs? First, by developing relationships with local government and community leaders. Libraries need to be less autonomous and adopt more collaborative approaches to engaging with and building partnerships across the community.

"Think about how libraries fit into the overall strategy of communities, and how libraries can position themselves within the community to thrive," says Chris Coudriet, county manager in the County of New Hanover, North Carolina. This could include establishing libraries as creative hubs, or seeing the library as a one stop shop for community development.

"The public library has moved from being an institution that primarily services individuals to one that navigates community."

—TESSIE GUILLERMO

David Swindell, director of the Center for Urban Innovation at Arizona State University, observes: "Libraries are going to become more of a one-stop shop for many purposes: a living room, an incubator, the public attic. There are many diverse uses that can benefit the community, but siloes must be bridged. We should think of the future. How do we create a physical and virtual space so that it is adaptable to changes in the future?"

While looking to the future and innovation, libraries must be cautious not to simply chase the next big thing. "It is important to keep the core values of contributing knowledge to the community," says Robert Kiely, city manager of Lake Forest, Illinois. "The library is a place you don't know you need but couldn't live without."

ALIGNING LIBRARIES WITH COMMUNITY GOALS:

LIMITLESS LIBRARIES

More than 80,000 Nashville public school students and 7,000 educators have access to a wealth of resources thanks to this cooperative program between the Nashville Public Library and Metro Nashville Public Schools designed to foster resource sharing and improve student access to learning materials.

Created in 2009, at the behest of Nashville Mayor Karl Dean, Limitless Libraries began as a pilot project in three high schools and a ninth grade academy. Today, it serves all 128 schools with two full-time collection development librarians and a materials budget of more than $1 million. Library resources are delivered to students and educators at their schools boosting access to books, movies and music while integrating the library into students' daily lives. In addition, Limitless Libraries supports digital literacy by furnishing schools with e-readers, netbooks and iPads.

Since its launch, circulation of school library resources has increased 79 percent; 28,000 middle and high school students are registered Limitless Libraries users; and bulk purchasing and negotiated discounts have achieved an estimated $271,000 in savings while vastly expanding resources.

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PROVIDING ACCESS TO CONTENT IN ALL FORMATS

As the public library expands from a house of books to a platform for learning and participation, its ability to provide access to vast amounts of content in all formats, from traditional print to the latest digital content, is vital. "The participatory organization," writes Nina Simon in her book, *The Participatory Museum*, "is a place where visitors can create, share and connect with each other around content."[39] Libraries face two immediate major challenges in providing access to content in all forms:

- Being able to procure and share e-books and other digital content on the same basis as physical versions
- Having affordable, universal broadband technologies that deliver and help create content

Dealing with both challenges have been high priorities for public libraries throughout the country as they strengthen their leadership role in the digital era. The challenges have been particularly acute for small libraries, those in rural communities and those in some urban areas where limited budgets make access to e-books and high-speed broadband difficult despite high community demand for and interest in both.

Ensuring access to e-books, other e-content and broadband is a big concern going forward because it impacts the public library's ability to fulfill one of its core missions—to procure and share the leading ideas of the day. Access to e-content is complicated by the lack of clarity in copyright law in the digital arena and the inapplicability of the first sale doctrine that governs the purchase and subsequent use of physical books.[40] A national digital platform could help. "The emergence of DPLA and more focus on a national digital library platform can have significant and positive results to increase free public access to information in the Internet age. The way we address barriers to free use, copyright, e-book issues, etc., will have great impact on our capacity to support an 'educated informed citizenry' and shape library services of the future," writes Mamie Bittner of the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Stakeholders must work together to find solutions that work for content creators, publishers and the public.

There are many ways in which libraries individually or collectively can partner with publishers large and small. One option is to consider a "buy-it-now" option, which exists on some integrated library systems (ILS) for managing content, where patrons could buy a book not currently available at the library and have the option to donate it back to the library when done so that others can get it.

This brings revenue, helps the mission and celebrates the book. Libraries split the revenue and it brings value to the publishers too. Such a proposal returns the public library back to the origins of the sharing library. Take that imperative and the library's digital public space, and this sets a common set of values on which a platform can be built.

On the broadband front, efforts to reform the federal E-rate program, which provides funds to libraries and schools to support Internet connections, presents an opportunity for addressing this critical need. "E-rate's structure should reflect the fact that libraries have become the number one source for public Internet access in the country, particularly for adults who do not have home computers or lack high-speed Internet connectivity," says Reed Hundt, who oversaw the creation of the E-rate program as chairman of the FCC from 1993 to 1997.

Internally, many libraries need massive upgrades of Wi-Fi connectivity to meet the burgeoning demand of "bring-your-own-device" connectivity. City library systems have many more users per year than rural, town or suburban libraries, and thus have different costs to cover, but all libraries need the same outcomes: high speed broadband that meets the needs of every library user and is not dependent on one's zip code.[41]

The clear need is for high capacity, easily scalable broadband in every public library. Specific target speeds are subject to ongoing debate, as the actual needs of individual communities may vary considerably. However, the nation's major public library associations have called for one gigabit connectivity to schools and libraries, writing in support of "advancing President Obama's goal of connecting our students and their communities to the one gigabit speeds we know are necessary for many libraries today and for the remaining libraries tomorrow."[42] High capacity connectivity will be necessary, especially in high-use public libraries, to support peak platform uses including new learning, creative and collaborative uses and higher bandwidth applications like video.

Collaboration among libraries, content creators, publishers, government officials/policy makers and community leaders is vital to overcoming these challenges. Together, they must address questions surrounding the library's role in (a) nurturing and sustaining vibrant cultural ecosystems, (b) learning and reading in a radically changing environment and (c) an evolving content ecosystem.

CHATTANOOGA PUBLIC LIBRARY AND A CITY'S REVIVAL

Chattanooga, Tennessee is a mid-sized city that was the most industrialized location in the U.S. South and as result was designated the "dirtiest city in America" in the 1960s. Since then, building on what it sees as a history of innovation and a comparatively well-functioning civic culture, the city's public and private leadership have worked hard to revive the city.

From 2009 through 2011, Chattanooga's municipally owned electric utility built out the first full gigabit network in the U.S. The city's mayor, Ron Littlefield, Chamber of Commerce leaders and executives of local foundations took this as an opportunity to redefine the image of the city as GigCity – a post-industrial hot spot. Given his background as an urban planner and economic development director, Mayor Littlefield emphasized entrepreneurship and the knowledge economy, built on the foundation of the gigabit network.

As this was going on, the Mayor realized that the public library was not fulfilling the role it could in this new knowledge economy. He worked with the board of the library and especially one of its members, Tom Griscom, to make necessary changes. Griscom was the publisher and executive editor of the Chattanooga Times Free Press until 2010. He saw the dramatic changes that technology and the Internet had wrought on his industry and was determined that the public library would flourish in the face of the challenges the digital age posed to its role in the community.

Littlefield and Griscom had a series of library board meetings focused on the future of libraries and the city. One result of those discussions was the appointment of Corinne Hill as head of the library in 2012. Hill and her team began to convert this old institution into a GigLibrary.

What had been a poorly used space in the main library, its fourth floor, was converted into a location for entrepreneurs, innovators, techies and other creative members of the community to share ideas and build businesses. In 2013, the library hosted an event on 3D printing and other technologies that attracted more than 1,200 people. The fourth floor then became a "gig-powered" maker space. The city's GigTank Demo day was also streamed live from the fourth floor and included the work of digital artists who used the library as their creative studio.

These efforts have made the library essential to the future movers and shakers of 21st century Chattanooga, who previously hadn't thought of the library as an institution that was even relevant to them.

—NORMAN JACKNIS

ENSURING LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing public libraries today is to transform their service model to meet the demands of the knowledge society while securing a sustainable funding base for the future.[43] With limited and sometimes volatile funding, however, such transformations will be uneven and incomplete. In addition, the highly local nature of public library funding and governance structures may interfere with both rapid and broad scale progress—the kind of scale needed to compete and thrive in a world of global networks. Challenges that shape the discussion about long-term public library sustainability, given their vital role in the digital era, include:

- Identifying reliable sources of revenue for daily operations as well as long-term planning and investment
- Exploring alternative governance structures and business models that maximize efficient and sustainable library operations and customer service
- Becoming more skilled at measuring outcomes rather than counting activities
- Balancing the local and national library value proposition to consider economies of scale in a networked world without compromising local control

FUNDING. Public libraries have long relied on local funding sources. According to a recent IMLS public library survey, nearly 85 percent of all public library operating revenue comes from local sources, including general revenue funds, dedicated property taxes, voter-approved taxes and a portion of sales taxes. Nationally, libraries receive about 7.5 percent of their annual revenue from states and only one-half of one percent from the federal government. Other sources accounted for just over 7 percent.[44] In some cases, notably in small cities and rural areas, libraries struggle to keep up because of extremely limited and unpredictable funding.

"A lot of elected officials who make decisions on funding haven't been in a library in years. There is a need to get these officials in the [library] building to understand how libraries function now. Getting people invested will educate them and open their eyes to the importance of libraries," says Amy Paul, corporate vice president of Management Partners, a consulting firm that works with local governments to improve their operations.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF RURAL AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

The challenge of sustainable funding is particularly acute in libraries serving small and rural communities. The needs are great, particularly for broadband access, and the financial and human resources in libraries are often limited. Service areas in rural communities are often widely dispersed, making the need for digital connections even more valuable to bring the library directly to people in their homes. Librarian skills and training can vary widely as well. Rural communities can look to their local libraries as partners for creating self-sustaining, long-term community and economic development, especially with the library's focus on growing human and social capital.

Strategies to support and engage small and rural libraries include:

- **EXPLORING REGIONAL MODELS** to create economies of scale
- **MAXIMIZING GRANT OPPORTUNITIES** from foundations and funders to meet program and service needs that are specific to the rural and small library context
- **CREATING CONNECTIONS** among librarians to share models, lessons learned and resources
- **BECOMING PART OF LARGER LIBRARY PLATFORMS** that provide access to larger bodies of content

Sustainable funding means more than an annual operating budget to carry out the library's mission and deliver services annually. It also means providing a foundation for the long-term planning needed to continue to offer leading-edge learning opportunities, develop and maintain expertise, keep pace with changes in the knowledge and creative economies and invest in the future. Library funding should be commensurate with the essential nature of the services provided by the public library as a vitally important civic and educational institution.

Further complicating the library funding situation is the increase in government mandates that have affected expectations of public libraries in supporting e-government services. There has been a noticeable shift in what this requires of libraries—moving from simply providing government forms to providing computers and training to access and navigate. Very often, libraries must deliver services to meet these growing demands without any additional funding to cover the costs.[45] Without additional funding to support the new requests for services, the library's staff and resources will be stretched too thin.

Moving toward financial sustainability requires a willingness to explore new avenues for funding, including opening up discussions about endowing public libraries in ways similar to other educational and cultural institutions. Libraries themselves must look at alternatives to traditional funding models, such as revenue or resource sharing, which require new or different skills that some libraries currently do not have.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES. Closely related to funding are library organization and governance structures. Library governance structures vary widely. For example, some libraries are part of a county or municipal government, others function as a special district or operate under joint powers authority agreements among participating jurisdictions. A few libraries are 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations.[46] A comprehensive, up-to-date mapping of library governance and funding models is needed as a starting point for a national discussion about long-term public library sustainability. That conversation could examine what the most effective models are for long-term sustainability and advocate for those models. For example, Pam Sandlian-Smith, CEO of Anythink Libraries in Colorado, commented on the transition of her library system from county funding to a special taxing district model: "Special taxing districts are effective for longer-term planning and transformation. They provide certainty and are less open to political changes."

BUSINESS MODELS. Even if public libraries had all the money in the world, they would still need to change the way they do business in the digital era. This includes developing new organizational and business models and considering new frameworks for funding. New business models should be based on the library's intellectual, space and data assets—its people, place and platform assets. There are two sides to a business model: cost savings and new revenue sources, or profit centers. While government should continue to be the primary funder of public libraries, there is room for libraries to explore new revenue streams, new partnerships that can yield new revenues and a modern business plan. Suggestions for new thinking include outcome-based funding models and libraries formed around enterprises.

MEASURING OUTCOMES. For a long time, the impact of the public library has been measured by what the library could count—patrons who walked through the doors, books and other materials checked out, the number of people in seats at training classes or other programs. But the measurements that matter most—to government officials, foundations, donors, and community stakeholders—are outcomes that report how the library is helping to achieve community goals and objectives. This will require libraries to think differently about data and to assess, on a broad scale, the outcomes they achieve and the impact they make on the lives of individuals and the community.[47]

BALANCING LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL INTERESTS. In a networked world, libraries must become more skilled at balancing local interests with a national value proposition based around the library as platform that, in some cases, could lead to consolidated operations. Finding the places where there is statewide, regional or national interest, scope and scale can increase library efficiency and impact.

For example, IMLS has developed a national value proposition around the areas that it has funded—including early learning, lifelong learning, citizenship, public health and jobs—that taps federal resources for use at the local level. At the state level, state funding can alleviate financial and other pressures that can allow the local library extra breathing room to focus on redesign and transformation. For local libraries the question is how do they differentiate locally, prioritize and align the library's services with the needs of the community.

NEW YORK AND BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARIES, NY:

BookOps: SHARED LIBRARY TECHNICAL SERVICES

To meet the challenges of a combined $57 million decrease in city funding between 2008 and 2013, and a 19 percent decrease in staffing, The New York Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library are consolidating their book buying and collection management activities into a shared central location.

When fully implemented, BookOps will combine acquisitions, cataloguing, processing, sorting and delivery of books and resources to the libraries in each system and will save the two library systems up to $3.5 million annually.

The collaborative effort provides a strong foundation for future citywide strategies to create new efficiencies including universal returns, universal requests, universal library cards and expansion of the MyLibraryNYC joint venture that includes the New York, Brooklyn and Queens Public Libraries and the New York City Department of Education.

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"The library in the digital age is moving from the warehouse of materials to a participatory learning organization."

—PAM SANDLIAN SMITH

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION. Libraries and their communities increasingly need to work together to pioneer new models of collaboration and decision making. They must embrace a new level of interdependence and align goals. This includes collaboration among libraries and partnerships with other stakeholders in government, community service, foundations, the private sector and members of the public. As library collections shift to include more e-content drawn from different sources in the community or nationally, collaborations will make even more sense. This could have a considerable impact on funding and sustainability, especially if partnerships leverage content that is then not subject to duplicative purchases. Libraries can build on experience with prior collaborations and consortia.

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP

Leadership is needed at the local, state and national levels—from elected officials, government administrative and political staff, business and civic leaders, and libraries themselves—to build communities and public libraries that thrive and succeed together. Vision is a critical component of leadership, and every community needs a vision and a strategic plan that includes a blueprint for how to work with the public library to directly align the library and its work with the community's educational, economic and other key goals. It must have input from all stakeholder groups in the community.

Key steps in building community leadership to support the public library include improving communications with community leaders, developing community champions, strengthening intersections with diverse communities and communities of color, reaching out and engaging with young-professional organizations and demonstrating the collective impact of partners working together.

Librarians in many places are recognized as community leaders, but their experience has been in fielding problems as they walk in the door, not in going out into their communities trying to identify or solve community needs. That will not work anymore. "We can't just be providing space," says John Szabo, director of the Los Angeles Public Library. "We are a learning institution, not just an access institution."

"If you want to reach out and help new Americans and citizenship in your city, there are lots of organizations who want to do the work, but libraries become the connector between the CBO and citizens."

—MAYOR KARL DEAN

Librarians must go beyond the walls of the library and into the community, to engage different stakeholders groups and explore how to provide library services that are untethered from the library building itself. It is important to identify and cultivate champions in the private sector, especially those that can leverage philanthropic action to support the library and help to showcase the library as a community asset.

Communication is another key component of leadership. Despite the enormous public confidence libraries enjoy, they are often not included in strategic conversations with civic leaders. The problem, says Susan Benton, president of the Urban Libraries Council, "is that civic engagement is so organic to what librarians do that they don't think to explain it." The profound effect that libraries are having on individuals and communities throughout society is not a story that is being told. Communication as a means to drive patronage is not enough.

Library boards, trustees, foundations and friends groups can be called on to support the re-envisioned library and activate their constituents when library budgets are on the chopping block. Library champions are especially needed at the state and national levels. Having champions in the business, government and nonprofit communities can open new opportunities for libraries as they increase their community impact. Those who donate money, equipment, technical expertise and other resources to public libraries ought to take a more visible role in communicating the value of engagement with the library and the benefits that accrue to the entire community. And these stakeholders are vital for forming a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation that can thrive with the help of the public library.

The changing demographics in the United States show the rising clout of communities of color. In some locations, public libraries have not been as effective as they could be in engaging and reaching out to minority communities.[48] To deal with this challenge, libraries increasingly are going out into the neighborhoods they serve to understand and address the unique needs and concerns of every constituency. Library staffs and boards need to reflect the communities that they serve. Empowering all members of the community is also a function of leadership.

Partnerships allow communities to leverage many of the resources in the community for greater impact and benefit. The library often plays a key role as a connector in forming relationships across the community. Systemic rather than ad-hoc partnerships are important for nurturing and growing relationships and for building network connections. Partnerships that start from the center of the library system and reach out to as many neighborhoods, communities, and branches as possible are also particularly desirable and productive.

For example, Nashville, Tennessee, is home to a diverse set of ethnic communities, including Kurdish, Somalian and Latino populations. When the city wanted to connect with these new populations to encourage local involvement and citizenship, public libraries became the connectors between the community-based organizations (CBOs) and these new residents. "If you want to reach out and help new Americans and citizenship in your city, there are lots of organizations who want to do the work, but libraries become the connectors between the CBO and citizens," Nashville Mayor Karl Dean told the Dialogue.

As the breadth of the library's role and impact in the community continues to evolve, leadership and professional development will be crucial to continued success in the digital era. Library leaders will need to design transformative change and become experts in their communities. They will also need to invest in developing their staff in ways that may be very different from what they learned in school or have done in the past. Libraries will need fewer staff to put books on shelves and a lot more staff to be educators. Library training and professional programs will have to change. People with new and diverse skills will be hired.

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP:

COMMUNITY IMPACT THROUGH RENEWED ENGAGEMENT

The San Francisco Public Library initiated a comprehensive team-driven research process to renew and refresh community connections in five city neighborhoods.

The process combined the library's award-winning GenPL emerging leaders program with its commitment to forging deep and sustained community impact. The emerging leaders, who come from all parts of the library system (pages, librarians, paraprofessionals, security staff, custodians), brought broad thinking and new perspectives to the effort. From walks in the neighborhoods, to ride-alongs with police, to interviews with community members, the teams spent three months gathering data and then presented their findings to community members and library staff in their assigned service area.

The recommendations, some of which are already in progress, ranged from branch-specific modifications to system-wide changes including:

- A new Community Programs and Partnerships division that combines youth service and community engagement
- A branding project to tie each branch to neighborhood identities
- Enhanced service promotion with community agencies such as GED and English as a Second Language providers and local farmers' markets
- Multi-lingual library orientation programs and a multi-lingual, real-time reference service
- Expanded off-site services including a technology bookmobile, pop-up libraries and classes in community agencies

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Key leadership challenges for the library profession in general and individual library directors include:

- **TAKING ADVANTAGE OF DIGITAL TOOLS** to share resources, create new channels for information about what works and diffuse innovation more rapidly and effectively
- **BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF THE LIBRARY FIELD** to develop new business models and experiment, which may include looking outside the United States to library innovators around the world
- **BUILDING CAPACITY** to meet the evolving demands and needs of new educational models and opportunities
- **GIVING GREATER THOUGHT AND ATTENTION TO SUCCESSION PLANNING** to develop bench strength and focus on the skills that will be needed for the library of the future
- **INCLUDING TRUSTEES AND FRIENDS GROUPS** in leadership development activities as part of a broader effort to engage and create library champions and advocates at every level
- **DEVELOPING PLANS AND STRATEGIES** for keeping pace with disruptive changes in the environment and establishing multiple channels for sharing information widely about changes, successes, opportunities and leadership needs

CONCLUSION AND A CALL TO ACTION

Visions are by nature aspirational, as are public libraries. Libraries reflect the community at its best—engaged, striving, participating, achieving, discovering, creating and innovating. The power to re-envision public libraries is the power to re-envision our communities for success in the digital era.

Re-envisioning the public library for every community will require a unity of purpose and action by stakeholders at all levels. Everyone has a stake in building healthy and engaged communities; every stakeholder is a library stakeholder.

Acting on the framework presented in this report starts with a shared recognition of the vital role public libraries are playing, will play and can play in the digital arena and a commitment to take advantage of the possibilities.

To get started, public libraries, library directors, library staff and their supporters must forge new partnerships and collaborations in the community and align their work with the community's goals. But libraries and their supporters are only one part of the equation. Re-envisioning the public library is a broad effort that requires the community and its elected leaders to recognize their stewardship of this valuable public asset. Accordingly, government and other leaders are called upon to support the transformation of public libraries by heeding the call to action and advancing the actions steps recommended in this report.

Leadership at the local level is crucial, as public libraries are a quintessentially local institution of democratic society. However, if we are to realize the vision of a national digital platform and networks of knowledge, innovation and creativity spanning the country, then state and national leadership and investment will be essential to coordinating and sustaining such an enterprise.

Library, government and civic leaders will have to adopt new thinking about the public library if we are to achieve a nation of informed, engaged communities. This thinking rests on understanding what makes the library uniquely valuable to the communities beginning with its people, place and platform assets upon which the community can build a successful future together. It also rests on the uniquely public value proposition grounded in the principles of equity, access, opportunity, openness and participation. These are also values at the heart of American democracy. While the vision speaks to the role of the public library and its relationship to the public, it is essentially a vision for the quality of the democratic communities that we want to nourish and sustain in the 21st century.

Libraries are essential partners with government, business and nonprofit community partners in achieving our national aspirations. All stakeholders should ask themselves, ***what can I do to help connect the community to the 21st-century knowledge society?***—and then go to the public library to learn the answer.

GETTING STARTED:

15 STEPS FOR LIBRARY LEADERS, POLICYMAKERS AND THE COMMUNITY

To advance progress toward the vision, and with these four strategic opportunities in mind, the Dialogue offers a series of action steps for getting started. There are 15 action steps addressed to each stakeholder group: library leaders, policymakers and the community. These are not intended to be comprehensive lists, and the steps are not organized in any sequential order. Rather, they are recommendations for actions that have surfaced throughout the Dialogue's deliberations and consultations and offer a starting point for change. They are necessarily general, as the unique people, needs, resources, environments and character of each community will have to guide specific community goals and action plans. This report itself is offered as a beginning—not an end—to a broader national dialogue on the future of the public library.

15 Action Steps for **LIBRARY LEADERS**

1. Define the scope of the library's programs, services and offerings around community priorities, recognizing that this process may lead to choices and trade-offs.
2. Collaborate with government agencies at the local, state and federal levels around shared objectives. This includes partnerships with schools to drive learning and educational opportunities throughout the community.
3. Partner with local businesses, chambers of commerce and community colleges to provide access to curricula and resources, to technology and certification programs and to job search resources to maintain a highly skilled yet highly flexible workforce.
4. Engage the community in planning and decision making, and seek a seat at tables where important policy issues are discussed and decisions made.
5. Connect resources from other agencies or libraries to the library platform rather than reinventing the wheel or always going solo.
6. Develop partnerships and collaborations with other libraries and knowledge networks that can contribute to efficiencies, using the opportunities provided by digital technologies.
7. Support the concept of a national digital platform to share collections nationally while continuing to maintain a local presence and focus; participate in content-sharing networks and platforms.
8. Deploy existing resources in new ways.
9. Collaborate in negotiations with publishers on reasonably priced and easily accessible access to e-content and develop win-win solutions like "buy-it-now" options.
10. Provide mobile devices for in-library, in-community and at-home use.
11. Measure library outcomes and impacts to better demonstrate the library's value to the community and communicate these outcomes to key partners and policy makers.
12. Communicate the library's story of impact directly to the public, partners, stakeholders and policy makers. Include the new vision built on the library's people, place and platform assets.
13. Develop a richer online library experience and stronger competencies in using digital and social media to demonstrate the library's role in the digital transformation.
14. Change long-held rules and operating procedures that impede the development of the library's spaces and platform.
15. Take proactive and sustained steps to brand the library as a platform for community learning and development.

15 Action Steps for **POLICY MAKERS**

1. Use the authority of office to bring together community stakeholders to create a comprehensive strategic plan for the library and other knowledge institutions in the community.
2. Define libraries as part of the community's priority infrastructure along with other established infrastructure priorities such as schools, transportation and parks, and make sustainable, long-term funding that reflects the library's value to the community a budget priority.
3. Develop strategic alliances and partnerships with local library leaders to advance educational, economic and social goals.[49]
4. Leverage the economic development potential of the public library as a community platform.
5. Make access to government information a model for curating open data.
6. Integrate librarians and state library agencies into development planning and policy making in all departments and at all levels of government.
7. Reduce barriers to libraries' ability to access some funding sources in authorizing and appropriations legislation.
8. Review state-level policies that affect the public library's ability to transform itself for the future.
9. Support a study on funding and governance structures for public libraries to identify strengths, weaknesses and opportunities that will lead to the development of stronger, more efficient public libraries.
10. Support and accelerate deployment of broadband, including high-speed, scalable broadband, to all libraries
11. Develop local, state and national plans to address digital readiness.
12. Promote the deployment of wireless hotspots in libraries and other public places, especially in economically disadvantaged and minority communities where there are fewer Wi-Fi hotspots, to access the library's platform anytime, anywhere.
13. Support rural and small libraries to ensure that all residents have access to world-class resources regardless of where they live.
14. Promote and invest in the infrastructure for a national digital platform that is scalable, flexible and serves diverse needs and new uses.
15. Be an informed champion for the library and what it offers in the community.

15 Action Steps for **COMMUNITY**

Private Sector, Community Partners, the Public

1. Collaborate on the development of a comprehensive strategic plan for the community's information and knowledge ecosystem, including the library and other knowledge institutions in the community.
2. Develop strategic partnerships and alliances with public libraries around content or specific organizational or community needs.
3. Bring diverse expertise to bear on helping libraries create and share technology tools.
4. Connect knowledge resources in the community to the library's knowledge networks.
5. Participate in the library's platform for curating local history and culture.
6. Leverage the economic development potential of the public library as a community platform.
7. Bring resources, including financial resources and technical expertise, to partner with libraries where objectives align well.
8. Volunteer organizational and technical expertise to mentor and support learning that takes place in library spaces and on its platform, including in innovation labs (especially those aimed at youth), maker and hacker spaces and resource-rich coworking spaces.
9. Structure grant opportunities in ways that small and rural libraries can take advantage of them; for example, not always emphasizing cutting-edge technology.
10. Leverage foundation or corporate donations to public libraries through the creation of a public-private trust for libraries.50
11. Support the deployment of broadband, Wi-Fi and digital literacy skills throughout the community, especially to economically disadvantaged, underserved and other special needs populations.
12. Advocate on behalf of the long-term sustainability of public libraries.
13. Collaborate with libraries in areas of mutual interest.
14. Explore the library's people, place and platform assets.
15. Support efforts to re-envision and rebrand the library as a vital community institution in the digital era.

Notes and References

1 In 1949, the computing pioneer Claude Shannon estimated that the largest store of information in the world, the collected holdings of the Library of Congress, contained 100 trillion bits of information. Today, as the physicist Freeman Dyson notes, individuals can fit that amount of information on a hard drive that weighs a few pounds and costs less than $1,000. And, he might have added, individuals can also gain access to this amount of information with a click of a mouse or the touch of a finger while surfing the Web. The digital revolution thus has made it possible to put the equivalent of all human knowledge into virtually every home.

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5 Ibid.

6 S. Craig Watkins, a University of Texas researcher and expert on the use of digital media among young people, especially African American and Hispanic teens, has written about the participation gap in society and the limitations of the benefits of high-speed broadband in communities where populations of residents "located in the social, financial, geographical and educational margins" lack sufficient social capital and social connectivity. On his website, *The Young and the Digital*, Watkins writes: "Importantly, the vast majority of U.S. workers will never be employed in the high skill, high income jobs that are driving our creative and knowledge economy. According to Monretti, about 10 percent of all of the jobs in the U.S. belong to the innovation sector. He adds that even during its peak, the manufacturing sector in the U.S. never employed more than 30 percent of the U.S. labor force. And while innovation hubs are economic growth engines, it is what Monretti calls the 'multiplier effect' that makes them particularly interesting. For every high tech job that is created in an innovation hub another five service-oriented jobs are added. These jobs may range from skilled occupations (lawyers, teachers) to unskilled occupations (hairdressers, waiters)." S. Craig Watkins, "Poorly Educated and Poorly Connected: The Hidden Realities of Innovation Hubs," *The Young and the Digital*, May 24, 2013, http://theyoungandthedigital.com/2013/05/24/poorly-educated-and-poorly-connected-the-hidden-realities-of-innovation-hubs/.

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20 One widely praised vision of the physical library of the future was published in a paper by Denmark's Royal School of Library and Information Science. This Danish model has four distinct but overlapping "spaces": an inspiration space, a learning space, a meeting space and a performing space. Each of these embraces a different ethos: aesthetic experiences; access to information and knowledge; face-to-face encounters with others, both accidental and purposeful; creation encouraged by access to and instruction in the use of technological tools; and the ability to publish or distribute creative work. These spaces are not necessarily physically discrete but should together "support the library's objectives in the knowledge and experience society…by incorporating them in the library's architecture, design, services, programs and choice of partnerships." Henrik Jochumsen, Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Dorte Skot-Hansen, *A New Model for the Public Library in the Knowledge and Experience Society*, Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, Royal School of Library and Information Science, http://www.kulturstyrelsen.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumenter/bibliotek/indsatsomraader/Udvalg_om_Folkebibliotekernes_rolle_i_videnssamfundet/A_new_model_for_the_public_library.pdf.

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29 One of the essential features of the public library's character—its unique accessibility— is also one of its weaknesses: with limited resources, its communities pull it in multiple directions, but increasingly toward a "deficit model" in which its role is more social safety net than social change agent. The library of the future cannot think of itself primarily as a remedial institution that exists to fill social deficits—in education, in access to information in any form, in democracy, in literacy. Instead the public library must become a "sharing" institution that grows social capital by curating and sharing all the information to which it has access, including sources of information that lie in its own community. It is impossible to imagine the sharing library not also filling deficits, even if it does it in new ways. The Dialogue believes that among the library's traditional core missions will always be to promote reading and literacy among both children and adults; to offer access to information at low cost, or to the user "free"; and to anchor communities. David Lankes, professor and Dean's Scholar of the New Librarianship at Syracuse University, and one of the United States' most visionary thinkers on the nature of libraries and their relationships with communities, names and addresses the "deficit model" debate very well on his blog. See, R. David Lankes, "Beyond the Bullet Points: Libraries Are Obsolete," *Virtual Dave…Real Blog* (blog), April 12, 2012, http://quartz.syr.edu/blog/?p=1567.

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The Dialogue on Public Libraries Working Group Participants

The Dialogue brought together a select 35-member Working Group that met twice in the project's first year to examine the evolving societal role of the public library, and to shape and advance a perspective that re-envisions U.S. public libraries for the future. This report is built upon the considerable knowledge, insights and experiences shared by these experts, practitioners and thought leaders. Affiliations are listed as of the date of the Working Group meetings.

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Formal Advisors to the Dialogue

To assist in its study and deliberations, the Aspen Institute Dialogue conducted outreach and engagement discussions with key library leadership groups and with local government administrative leaders. The Dialogue is grateful to the following individuals who offered input on one or more occasions.

MARCH 13, 2014

Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries at PLA 2014 Conference
Indianapolis, Indiana

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- **Brian Auger,** Director, Somerset County Library System (New Jersey)
- **Andrea Berstler**, Executive Director, Wicomico Public Library (Maryland)
- **Clara Bohrer**, Director, West Bloomfield Township Public Library (Michigan)
- **James Cooper**, Library Director, Salt Lake County Library Services (Utah)
- **Sara Dallas**, Director, Southern Adirondack Library System (New York)
- **Karen Danczak-Lyons**, Director, Evanston Public Library (Illinois)
- **Mary Hastler**, Director, Harford County Public Library (Maryland)
- **Denise Rae Lyons**, Director of Library Development, South Carolina State Library
- **Maura Marx**, Deputy Director for Library Services, Institute of Museum and Library Services
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- **Andrew Medlar**, Assistant Commissioner for Collections, Chicago Public Library
- **Gina Millsap**, Chief Executive Officer, Topeka Shawnee County Public Library (Kansas)
- **Larry Neal**, Library Director, Clinton-Macomb Public Library (Michigan)
- **Vailey Oehlke**, Director, Multnomah County Library (Oregon)
- **Karyn Prechtel**, Deputy Director, Pima County Public Library (Arizona)
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- **Rivkah Sass**, Director, Sacramento Public Library (California)
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- **Jay Turner**, Director, Continuing Education , Georgia Public Library Service
- **Marcia Warner**, Library Director, Grand Rapids Public Library (Michigan)

APRIL 22, 2014

Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries ARSL Discussion
Conference Call

- **Tameca Beckett**, Youth Services Librarian, Laurel Public Library (Delaware)
- **Donna Brice**, Director, Eastern Lancaster County Library (Pennsylvania)
- **Kieran Hixon**, Technology Consultant, Colorado State Library
- **Jet Kofoot**, Library Consultant, Iowa Library Services, North Central District
- **Carla Lehn**, Library Development Services, California State Library
- **Carolyn Petersen**, Assistant Program Manager, Library Development, Washington State Library
- **Gail Sheldon**, Director, Somerset County Library System (Maryland)
- **Cal Shepard**, State Librarian, State Library of North Carolina
- **Mary Stenger**, Director, Southern Area Library (West Virginia)

MAY 8, 2014

Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries
Meeting with Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA)
Washington, D.C.

- **Stacey Aldrich**, Deputy Secretary of Education and Commissioner for Libraries, Pennsylvania Department of Education
- **Tim Cherubini**, Executive Director, COSLA
- **Sarah Chesemore**, President, The Chesemore Group, Inc.
- **Ann Joslin**, State Librarian, Idaho Commission for Libraries
- **Susan McVey**, Director, Oklahoma Department of Libraries
- **Wayne Onkst**, State Librarian & Commissioner, Kentucky Department for Libraries & Archives
- **Lamar Veatch**, State Librarian, Georgia Public Library Service
- **Kendall Wiggin**, State Librarian, State of Connecticut

SEPTEMBER 14, 2014

Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries at ICMA Annual Conference
Charlotte, North Carolina

- **Carolyn Anthony**, Director, Skokie Public Library, Skokie, Illinois
- **Michael Baker**, Deputy Village Manager, Village of Downers Grove, Illinois
- **Jane Brautigam**, City Manager, City of Boulder, Colorado
- **Ron Carlee**, City Manager, City of Charlotte, North Carolina
- **Larra Clark**, Director, Program on Networks, and Associate Director, Program on America's Libraries for the 21st Century, ALA Washington Office
- **Chris Coudriet**, County Manager, County of New Hanover, Wilmington, North Carolina
- **Donald Crawford**, City Manager, City of Owosso, Michigan
- **Charles Duggan Jr.**, City Manager, City of Auburn, Alabama
- **Rod Gould**, City Manager, City of Santa Monica, California
- **Bob Harrison**, City Administrator, City of Issaquah, Washington
- **Susan Hildreth**, Director, Institute of Museum and Library Services
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- **Victoria Yarbrough**, Leisure and Library Services Director, City of Sierra Vista, Arizona

Informal Advisors to the Dialogue

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- **Bob White**, Deputy Director, Region 2000 Local Government Council (VA)
- **John Windhausen**, Director, SHLB Coalition
- **Josh Wyner**, Executive Director, Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, The Aspen Institute

About the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries

The Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries is a multi-stakeholder forum to explore and champion new thinking on U.S. public libraries, with the goal of fostering concrete actions to support and transform public libraries for a more diverse, mobile and connected society. It focuses on the impact of the digital revolution on access to information, knowledge and the conduct of daily life. Supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and managed by the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, the Dialogue seeks to shape and advance a renewed national vision for public libraries in the 21st century.

With the assistance of thought leaders from business, technology, education, government, the nonprofit sector and libraries, the Dialogue on Public Libraries considers the changing role of public libraries and seeks to articulate a renewed vision for the vital role they serve as community platforms to advance educational and other opportunities in a knowledge-based society. The Dialogue is a catalyst for identifying ways in which communities can leverage investments in these essential public institutions to develop richer information ecologies, build stronger communities and forge new partnerships for achieving local and national goals. Through its working group convenings, outreach and engagement with diverse stakeholders, commissioned papers, published report and other activities, the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries seeks to ensure that public libraries remain as accessible and relevant to the needs of current and future generations as they have for previous generations of Americans.

About the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s

The Communications and Society Program is an active venue for framing policies and developing recommendations in the information and communications fields. We provide a multi-disciplinary space where veteran and emerging decision-makers can develop new approaches and suggestions for communications policy. The Program enables global leaders and experts to explore new concepts, exchange insights, develop meaningful networks, and find personal growth, all for the betterment of society.

The Program's projects range across many areas of information, communications and media policy. Our activities focus on a broad spectrum of ICT issues such as open and innovative governance, public diplomacy, institutional innovation, broadband and spectrum management, consumer cybersecurity, connected learning, issues of race and diversity, and the free flow of digital goods, services and ideas across borders.

Most conferences employ the signature Aspen Institute seminar format: approximately 25 leaders from diverse disciplines and perspectives engaged in roundtable dialogue, moderated with the goal of driving the agenda to specific conclusions and recommendations. The program distributes our conference reports and other materials to key policymakers, opinion leaders and the public in the United States and around the world. We also use the internet and social media to inform and ignite broader conversations that foster greater participation in the democratic process.

The Program's Executive Director is Charles M. Firestone. He has served in this capacity since 1989 and is also a Vice President of the Aspen Institute. Prior to joining the Institute, Mr. Firestone was a communications attorney and law professor who has argued two cases before the United States Supreme Court and many in the courts of appeals. He is a former director of the UCLA Communications Law Program, first president of the Los Angeles Board of Telecommunications Commissioners, and an appellate attorney for the U.S. Federal Communications Commission.



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